

AAUW works toward greater availability of and access to a high standard of benefits and policies that promote work-life balance, including quality and affordable dependent care and paid family, medical and sick leave.

Unlike the [majority](#) of developed countries worldwide, the United States does not guarantee paid annual leave, paid time off for illness or family care, or paid parental leave. Without these policies, balancing the responsibilities of work and family can be difficult for employees—negatively impacting productivity, making recovery from major illnesses or injuries difficult, and in some cases inhibiting the healthy development of children. For the millions of Americans without paid sick days, a decision to stay home to care for a sick child or family member could jeopardize their job or family income.

AAUW in Action

All public policy actions take direction from the [AAUW Public Policy Priorities](#), voted on by members every two years. AAUW is a nonpartisan organization—but nonpartisan does not mean “non-political.” Since its first meeting in 1881, AAUW has been a catalyst for change. Together, through our coordinated and strategic advocacy, we’ve enacted invaluable legislation at the federal, state and local levels. The 2021-2023 Public Policy Priorities call for the availability of and access to quality paid family, medical and sick leave.

The public policy team engages in many efforts on this key issue, including but not limited to:

- Working in coalition with other gender equity organizations, including the National Work and Family Coalition and Paid Leave Legislative Working Group.
- Mobilizing AAUW advocates and members through targeted calls to action on important legislation, like the [FAMILY Act](#) and [Healthy Families Act](#).
- Engaging directly with elected leaders and the public through calls, [letters](#) to political offices, and comments and testimony in hearings.
- Providing voter education resources on key equity issues to consider during elections and offering information on how elected officials have voted in the past (more about this and Get Out the Vote guides at the [AAUW Action Fund](#)).

Paid Family and Medical Leave

At some point, most workers will need time away from work to deal with a serious personal or family illness or to care for a new child. Unfortunately, only [23% of those working](#) for employers with more than 500 employees have access to paid family leave through their employer; and only 9% of those working for employers with under 100 employees do. Among the lowest-wage workers, many of whom cannot afford to lose income by taking time off work, only [7% have access](#) to paid family leave. Without access to paid leave, workers—especially women and mothers—face the continuing economic disadvantage of lost wages and are forced to prematurely return to work.

While the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993, which provides job-protected, unpaid leave, was an important first step, its promise remains out of reach for many. FMLA fails to cover about 40% of workers, including those at companies with fewer than 50 employees, those who have been with their employer for less than a year, and those who have not met the required number of annual hours. Even when covered under FMLA, many workers [cannot afford](#) to take unpaid leave without endangering their economic security.

A federal paid leave program would build stronger families and healthier workers. Paid leave contributes to improved newborn and child health by allowing both parents the time they need to help with health care decisions and responsibilities. Further, it allows ill or injured workers time to recover and [enables people](#) to help their loved ones to recover from illness and avoid complications, thereby reducing hospital readmissions and health care costs.

Paid leave [helps businesses](#) by improving employee retention and reducing the high costs of turnover, such as advertising, interviewing, and training new hires. A comprehensive review found that the cost of turnover can range from [16-200%](#) of an employee’s annual compensation, making

such unnecessary turnover very costly for employers. In [California](#), for example, workers in low-wage, high-turnover industries are much more likely to return to their jobs after using the state's family leave insurance program.

Paid Sick Days

In addition to lacking federal paid family and medical leave, more than [26 million](#) private-sector workers—nearly one-quarter of the workforce—cannot earn paid sick days. [Low-paid workers](#) are especially hard hit, with [only 33%](#) of the lowest-paid workers having access to paid sick days. Without access to paid sick days, workers are forced to make difficult decisions when they fall ill: jeopardize their employment and forgo a paycheck, or go to work sick. For those who work in public-facing industries, such as food service, that endangers public health.

Today, only [60% of working women](#) have some access to paid sick days and nearly 40% of mothers say they are solely responsible for staying home from work with sick children, compared with only 3% of fathers. Women [disproportionately bear](#) the economic cost of taking children or elderly family members to the doctor. Yet, many women [delay seeking health care](#) for themselves because they cannot take time off work, affecting their capacities as employees and primary caregivers.

If hardworking Americans have access to a minimum number of earned sick days that can also be used to care for sick family members, working parents and caregivers will no longer have to make the difficult choice between caring for loved ones, or themselves, and losing much-needed income. For a family without paid sick days, [three days of pay](#) lost to illness can be the equivalent of their monthly health care or food budget.

Paid sick days are also good for workforce stability and business productivity. Workers who do come into work sick are significantly less productive—amounting to a loss of [\\$218 billion per year](#). Paid sick days help reduce these unnecessary costs for employers.

Paid Leave During the Pandemic

For many Americans, unpaid time off work is untenable and threatens their economic security. During a pandemic, this can mean choosing between livelihood and life. Among service workers, who have continued to serve as a critical workforce throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, only 59% have access to paid sick days and a mere 15% have paid family leave.

Many parents, particularly women, cannot return to the workforce without access to paid leave and child care – as of April 2021, 1.5 million mothers had still not returned to the workforce. As women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of our country's ongoing economic and health crises, Congress must take steps to support working women and families and enact comprehensive paid family, medical, and sick leave in crisis recovery legislation.

Supporting Universal Paid Leave

AAUW supports the passage of federal legislation that promotes work-life balance, including paid family, medical, and sick leave.

- The [FAMILY Act](#) would create a national, self-funding paid family and medical leave insurance program for most of the U.S. workforce. The FAMILY Act is an affordable, cost-effective, and sustainably-funded solution that does not cut or reduce other essential benefits.
- The [Healthy Families Act](#) would ensure full-time workers in businesses with 15 or more employees can earn up to seven job-protected paid sick days each year. Workers could use these sick days for their own medical needs, to provide care for a sick family member, or to recover from or seek assistance related to an incident of domestic violence, stalking or sexual assault.

Until there is universal federal paid leave, workers will continue to rely on states to enact these important policies. Currently, [9 states and the District of Columbia](#) that have a paid family and medical leave insurance law, while [13 states and the District of Columbia](#), along with many smaller jurisdictions, have paid sick time laws.

Additional Resources

[Two-Minute Activist: Prioritize Paid Leave & Child Care](#)

American Association of University Women (AAUW)

[Two-Minute Activist: Support the Healthy Families Act](#)

American Association of University Women (AAUW)

[Two-Minute Activist: Pass the FAMILY Act](#)

American Association of University Women (AAUW)